



Review of 'Sense of the City'

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SENSE OF THE CITY AN ALTERNATE APPROACH TO URBANISM

Edited by Mirko Zardini

Anyone who has ever taken a dog for a walk, knows that what guides it in choosing a particular direction to drag you in, is its nose. Tracking the scents of its fellow canine wanderings is at the heart of a dog's urban experience. This may have something to do with the fact that a dog's olfactory membrane is approximately 30 times larger than our own, and so its environment is really that of a 'smellscape'. Were it not for the successive mutations that have shaped our own evolutionary development, we too might experience a city more with our nose, than with our eyes.

Recently there has been something of a renewed interest in what has been termed 'sensorial architecture.' Reappraisals of many of the 60's and 70's counter movements in architecture have inspired a need to find and explore alternative approaches to urbanism, beyond the merely formal or historical.

'Sense of the City' celebrates this search for a 'sensorial urbanism' and marks the opening of a major exhibition at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal. Preferring to reframe discussions in terms of: 'Nocturnal City', 'Seasonal City', 'Sound of the City', 'Surface of the City' and 'Air of the City', our perceptions of the built environment are redirected towards one where the senses are the important keys to exploring urban life.

The book opens with some black and white images culled from the architecture magazines of the 70's. They show projects by Buckminster Fuller, Kenzo Tange, Superstudio and Archigram: vast abstract speculations



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into imaginary cities. By contrast at the end of the book, it is photographs of 'real' cities: Moscow, Lagos, Venice and Beijing, that flesh out what this book is all about. We are taken on a journey through history, facts and figures, essays, catalogues and photographs that uncover the hidden layers of our sensorial urban realm.

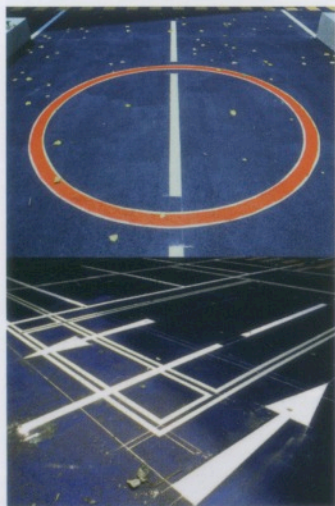
By comparison with the animal kingdom our perceptual abilities are somewhat limited. While the pigeon can see 340°; the bee can detect small magnetic fields; some spiders have eight eyes; and the cockroach can detect movement as small as 2,000 times the diameter of a hydrogen atom; few of us are aware of the smell -deliberately blown out through diffusers- from our nearest KFC, which draws us subliminally towards the 'chicken delights' of Colonel Sanders.

If we were able to go back in time and visit cities before they became sanitised in a relatively odourless tourist aura, the smells and sights would overwhelm us. As described in 'Air of the City' 19th-century London was typically awash with the offal of slaughterhouses in the streets, open sewers and a river that was in essence a moving cesspool. While much has been done in the name of progress -removing the threat of disease and pollution- we have

essentially over-sanitised and deodorised our cities.

'Nocturnal City' questions our reliance on artificial light and the splitting of the 24 hour natural cycle into a relentless operational system of eight-hour shifts. Medieval cities became quiet when people retreated indoors in fear of darkness and the monsters they imagined it held. Our 'second world' -constructed in artificial light- has erased the difference of night and day. Traditionally we have always celebrated and ritualised the contrasts of the natural world with festivals and events, which draw us in part, closer to nature.

In 'Seasonal City' postcards show big snow falls and celebrate the beauty of nature's vicissitudes: whole buildings and streets in Canada engulfed in ice and snow. In the essay 'The Ideas of Winterness: Embracing Ice and Snow' by Norman Pressman he describes how societies in the past had a strong understanding of their local climate and of mediating their lives with nature. The Inuit people of Northern



Canada had to survive each year with 10 months of harsh arctic winter and as a consequence their language was coloured with twenty-nine words for ice and twenty for snow. This not only ensured their own safety but that their longstanding culture and relationship with the landscape would be passed on to successive generations.

Now we have ice tourists, who make their way to Lapland and into temperatures of -45°C to see structures designed by contemporary architects and covered in brand names etched onto the ice. One of the



most famous and remarkable ice constructions - of the many shown - is the much earlier 'Ice Palace' designed by the architect Alexander Cowper and built for Montreal's Winter Carnival. Thirty thousand blocks of ice were carved from the frozen surface of the St Lawrence river and built to a height of over thirty metres.

Celebrating the pleasures of seasonal shifts in a contemporary way is Maya Lin's project for Grand Rapids, Michigan. An amphitheatre by summer and an ice-rink in winter, its fibre optic lights are embedded in the ice to mark out the constellation patterns of the winter sky.

This book raises many useful issues and questions about perception and climatic tolerance and wonders how much is culturally determined? Why can one society happily operate in extreme temperatures or invent mythologies to poeticize the long hours of darkness, while others expect a constant air-conditioned and seasonless comfort zone?

The Vancouver Soundscape Project uncovers and records sounds and explores ways to map them on the city. The sounds that irritate and annoy us vary enormously from culture to culture. In Germany it is noisy restaurants, in Canada it is trucks, while in South Africa it is strangely animals and birds. Thomas Carlyle created his own soundproof room within which he could withdraw to work and escape that 'infernal racket' of the city. Who could blame him? The delicate mechanism of the human ear (embossed in relief on the cover of the book) is barraged endlessly now with inescapable 'muzak' that "...fills our fear of silence."

In 'Surface of the City' the sensuous qualities of asphalt are both celebrated and derided: eco-warriors puncture it to reveal the languishing soil below while Marko Zardini traces the important cultural role it has played in the development of the modern city. Images taken by Nigel Henderson - 'Life-of-the-Streets' - for the Smithsons show children creatively using asphalt like a giant horizontal blackboard and playspace.

If Aristotle is famously quoted as defining that there are five senses and that both Erasmus and Darwin believed there was twelve, then they would all be surprised by recent studies suggesting there may be as many as seventeen. This 'sensorial revolution' awaits many new discoveries.

This is a dense and fascinating book that is packed full of images and ideas. Carefully designed to blend word and image, It unravels something of our blindness as to other ways of perceiving the city. By exploring a 'sensory geography' it is a plea for an architecture of the senses -no matter how many you believe there are. ●

Paul Clarke

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Edited by Mirko Zardini

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